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ABSTRACT

Based on the notion that a dialectical perspective better represents the processes and tensions involved in family communication than do traditional models, an exploratory study examined the communication practices of two television families: the Huxtables of "The Cosby Show," and the Keatons of "Family Ties." The series were selected because their consistently high ratings suggest that families accept and perhaps imitate the communication practices displayed by the characters. Five episodes, three from "Cosby" and two from "Family Ties" were studied and catalogued according to the types of tension exhibited in the dialogue. Two main oppositional relationships emerged: autonomy versus constraint and authoritative versus democratic. Examples of the autonomy versus constraint relationship suggest that family members negotiate over the boundaries set by one another, and that occasionally, dialectical tension rests in the phenomenon itself, not in the individuals. Similarly, authoritative versus democratic distributions of power concern family members' means for achieving and maintaining power. Such a dialectical analysis suggests that family relationships are based on process in behavioral practices, the temporality of such practices, and the inescapability of contradiction, rather than stable relationships and goal oriented behavior. (Two notes and 17 references are included.) (JC)

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TELEVISION AS SOCIAL REALITY: A DIALECTICAL ANALYSIS OF FAMILY INTERACTIONAL PROCESS IN "THE COSBY SHOW "AND "FAMILY TIES"

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TELEVISION AS SOCIAL REALITY: A DIALECTICAL ANALYSIS OF FAMILY INTERACTIONAL PROCESS IN "THE COSBY SHOW" and "FAMILY TIES"

ABSTRACT

This descriptive study examines family interaction in television situation comedies. Specifically, conversation data from "The Bill Cosby Show" and "Family Ties" are analyzed from a dialectical perspective. The analysis centers on the identification and discussion of two major oppositional relationships: autonomy/constraint and authoritarian/democratic. The researchers argue that televison portrayals are valuable sources of information concerning the maintenance of interpersonal relationships. Further, they claim that the application of a dialectical model to such data may yield more useful information about family interaction processes than do more traditional models of family communication. Finally, implications for future research are discussed.

INTRODUCTION

Television represents social reality insofar as it portrays social institutions (e.g., the family) and is itself a pivotal social institution.[1] One type of confrontation with the social institution called "family," occurs when people watch television families. The behavior of television families may provide viewers with a set of conversational forms out of which individuals forge assumptions about and orientations toward appropriate interaction in relationships. These relationships, of which families may be the most fundamental, consititute the context in which individuals construct their social realities.

Social reality, in Berger and Luckmann's terms, is constructed and maintained in a three-part process of "objectification," "institutionalization," and "internalization."[2] As indivduals' behavior becomes increasingly patterned, social activities become objectified, codified, and experienced as "given" features of the social environment. This objectified activity becomes formalized in institutions. Through their confrontations in and with social institutions, individuals internalize values and goals and reproduce these institutional objectives by following appropriate behavioral codes. Berger and Kellner emphasize the role of language in the creation and maintenance of social reality. They argue that societies are organized around linguistic configurations, which provide members with common points of reference; a commonly held world view. Speech practices are fundamental human products which are subject to codification and

internalization. Based on these taken-for-granted discursive conventions, individuals order their experience and negotiate workable versions of social reality.[3]

Given this theoretical context, the purposes of this study were twofold. The primary purpose was to analyze the conversational structure and interactional processes of two television families. Our selection of a conversation analytic procedure was based on the assumption that television families' interaction may serve as a source of raw material for viewing families' own conversational choices. The secondary purpose was to examine and demonstrate the utility of a dialectical perspective on family interaction. This perspective rests on substantially different assumptions than those underlying more traditional approaches to the study of family behavior. In order to set the stage for our analysis, we will first provide a brief review of the literature on the social uses of television. Next, we will critique one of the traditional treatments of family activity and discuss dialectical theory and methodology as an alternative, which, we will argue, is a potentially more viable approach to family interaction analyses.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE AND RATIONALE FOR THE STUDY

Scholars have empirically examined how, specifically, individuals employ television communication to construct their social realities. For example, studies have shown that children's exposure to family programs, which portray affiliative communication among family members, leads them to perceive their real-life families as more affiliative.[4] Other studies indicate television provides practical suggestions which are widely imitated by audience members. In some instances, these imitations may be useful in contributing to changing attitudes about how parents and siblings behave by providing information about

communication between family members and by helping families learn how to solve family problems.[5] Lull posits that television provides opportunities for family role fulfillment as television characters may confirm similar roles undertaken by family members which demonstrates one's role competence to other family members. Further, a family member may use television to learn and imitate acceptable role behavior resulting in acceptance of that role by the family.[6]

Still other researchers argue that television is a powerful mediator in shaping society by creating myths that function as a part of the reification of a culture,[7] by transmitting value systems to reinforce attitudes that are already in place, [8] and as a vehicle for the communication of cultural ideologies.[9] Indeed, we are what we view, because, as Gronbeck claims, the television programs that we choose to view reflect our own values and beliefs, and serve as cultural representatives of "significant others" that help us derive at our conceptions of "self".[10] Since viewers and producers draw from the same cultural resources, television programs may be seen as actually "embodying" the messages that reflect our socially shared knowledge. Moreover, Gronbeck argues that the social dialectics which underlie "real-world arrangements, behavior and rules-for-living"[11] are most fully integrated into family-centered shows as the familial roles and relationships epitomize all of human life and "gives us ourselves back."[12]

Given the foregoing philosophical and empirical evidence, studying communicative phenomena displayed in family situation comedies may provide us with information concerning one of the sources influencing our knowledge of "family." We may use the models provided by television families to structure our own re-enactments and modifications of family life. Insofar as television families tell us how the "typical" American family looks and acts, they may

also tell us how our own families should look and act.

Critique of a Traditional Model of Family Interaction

In recent years numerous scholars have argued for the importance of studying family process.[13] A seminal work in the study of process is that of Kantor and Lehr.[14] In their approach to family, members' activities are said to center on goal attainment. In attaining goals, families negotiate acceptable interpersonal "distances" among members in relation to targets of affect, power, and meaning.[15] As the family regulates the expenditures of energy involved in moving in time and across space, members modify or reorient their differential access to the three target dimensions.[16]

Although Kantor and Lehr provide a complex and thorough treatment of family interaction, their model rests on several problematic assumptions and biases which may limit the usefulness of the model in accounting for certain aspects of family life. First, and most foundationally, Kantor and Lehr's descriptions reveal a profoundly spatial-structural bias. This bias best presents itself in their key metaphor (family relations as distance-regulating activities) and the related concepts stemming from it such as target accessing and goal-seeking. These spatially-oriented notions suggest that families are bounded, localized, "mapable" <u>surfaces</u> on which the analyst can observe various members' placements in relation to other members and to particular goals. The problem with viewing families in this way is that in so doing, <u>action</u> becomes reduced to a figure or a graph. Such graphs are fully graspable in a single glance, are stripped of the particularity of the moments in which each spatial placement occurred, and are devoid of the <u>performances</u> or <u>operations</u> involved in marking successive movements through space.[17] In essence, spatially-biased representations ameliorate the temporal aspects of

family practice. In de Certeau's words:

> However useful this 'flattening out' may be, it transforms the temporal articulation of places into a spatial sequence of points. A graph takes the place of an operation.[18]

By their own admission, Kantor and Lehr's discussion of two of their central access dimensions (time and energy) are underdeveloped.[19] Kantor and Lehr's limited analysis of time and energy (the very sorts of dimensions which a spatial model must necessarily eclipse) seems to be the predictable outcome of applying a model which priviledges spatiality.

Similarly, while Kantor and Lehr ground their model in notions of family process derived from General Systems Theory, the model itself contains elaborate descriptions of the structure of family interaction but leaves the fluid, evolving, nonstatic, and, perhaps, contradictory elements of family process relatively unexplored. That is, Kantor and Lehr focus on the outcomes of movements in time across space while excluding the process of those movements themselves (the temporal dimension of family interaction). Sacrificing the practices themselves to the outcomes of practices seems to be an inherent limitation of laying abstracted spatialized models on to fluid streams of practice which unfold in real time. Applying the model necessitates "freezing" ongoing process and collapsing temporal movements into reified, static properties.

Another problem with the model is the centrality of goal-seeking in Kantor and Lehr's explanation of family members' behavior, which is undergirded by two arguable assumptions. First, Kantor and Lehr assume that families work toward unitary, consistent, and mutually understood goals. Their model assumes, then, that family life is an inherently cooperative and unified venture. Agreement and cooperation are taken to be the basis for family

cohesion. Thus, the model does not allow for the possibility that families are held together by the tensions generated from enduring contradictions embedded in social organization. Such contradictions, which are not permanently resolvable by appeals to uniformly shared goals, may be the driving force of family practice. Second, and relatedly, Kantor and Lehr's use of goals as the regulatory, normalizing mechanisms which direct family activity suggests a view of families as cybernetic systems. The authors present a feedback loop model based on the work of Norbert Wiener (which depicts a "thermostat-like" process aimed at maintaining a homeostatic balance) and suggest that feedback mechanisms in family systems basically operate according to such a model.[20] In their words:

> ...the information processed by the family system is distance-regulation information... family systems seek to attain their goals by continuously informing their members what constitutes a proper or optimal distance...[21]

As Wilden notes, the cybernetic system is essentially a closed, control-driven system in which feedback serves primarily to "maintain a predetermined goal."[22] Any analysis stemming from a cybernetic model cannot account for the heterogeneous, changing, and historically situated nature of elements and their relations. Kantor and Lehr posit unitary goals (organized around distance-regulation) and label virtually all family activity as, in one way or another, serving to direct behavior toward those goals. In so doing, they restrict the discussion of family systems to cybernetic mechanisms and do not allow for open systems analysis.

The Dialectical Approach

One way to avoid the problems we have cited above from Kantor and Lehr's work might be to refigure the analysis of family process on dialectical terrain. Dialectical logic and traditional formal logic differ in several

significant ways. The most fundamental difference between the two systems concerns how problems of identifying phenomena and accounting for temporal development are handled within each logical framework. Formal logic operates from the "law of the excluded middle."[23] This law states that things must be either themselves or something else: "A cannot equal non-A," statements cannot be both true and false; judgments are either correct or incorrect. A dialectical logic, on the other hand, assumes social reality to be inherently contradictory: A is both A and non-A. Such an assumption is warranted when change and motion are reintroduced into descriptions of the social world. That is, the formalist practice of dividing entities into mutually exclusive categores necessitates construing these entities in static terms. It is only when persons and their relations are conceptualized in some hypothetical, stationary position that fixed categorization becomes possible. In reality, the dialectician argues, such stationarity never occurs. On the contrary, persons are engaged in actions and movements in time which never cease. Such continual motion precludes the possibility of mutually exclusive categorization: "A moving thing is both here and there simultaneously. Otherwise it is not in motion but at rest."[24]

When viewed from the tenets of dialectical logic, a relationship is assumed to be a mini-culture with its own values, structures, and processes.[25] The dialectical contradictions and the experiential tensions they engender are located at the level of relationship rather than at the individual level. In addition, a dialectical approach focuses on the continuous process of relational development through change as opposed to "stable states" in relationships. As Cornforth claims," ...the world does not consist of things but of processes..."[26]

The dialectician then, rejects abstract formalisms, focuses on the

concrete materiality of human existence (e.g., language practice), identifies oppositions ("both/and" relations), describes how such oppositions function to produce identity (e.g., to produce a sense of "self" in a family or a sense of "our family" versus others), and emphasizes issues of time and historical change. Moreover, the dialectical approach to analyzing relationships assumes that contradictions and tensions created by oppositional relations cause the ongoing change process. As Baxter (in press) has noted, dialectical systems are comprised of "...webs of contradictions which may influence one another."[27]

In the analysis to follow we identified two dominant, recurrent dialectical tensions emerging from the two television families' conversations. Next, we documented the characters changing positionality (their alignments and realignments to the oppositional positions that emerge in relationships) on these dialectical axes. Marking such movements reintroduces the notion of temporality into the study of family process; dialectical tensions and oscillating postionality vis-a-vis such tensions serve to animate practical performances in time. Finally, we drew conclusions from the analysis which suggest the possible advantages of examining interpersonal interaction from a dialectical perspective and made recommendations for future research.

METHOD

This descriptive/qualitative study identifies the major dialectical tensions emerging out of the conversations of two television families.[28] In this section, we will detail the data gathering procedures and describe the television episodes selected for the analysis.

Procedures

"The Cosby Show" and "Family Ties" were selected for analysis because of their consistently high ratings, which, we assume, reflect to some degree, their continued acceptance by American viewing audiences; both shows have received Top 10 Neilsen ratings over a period of time. Given the popularity of these programs and the argument made previously that television is a representation of social reality, we reasoned that the data from these programs might contain oppositional relations characteristic of American family life.

Five episodes (three episodes of "The Cosby Show" and two episodes of "Family Ties") were recorded and transcribed.[29] While our goal was to analyze the family conversations from a dialectical perspective, we did not examine the data with a priori categorizations of dialectical relationship in mind. Rather, we looked for the contradictions and tensions that emerge from analyzing the turn-by-turn family conversations. The recurring oppositional relations in the ongoing interactional processes revealed two dominant dialectical relationships which we labeled Autonomy/Constraint and Authoritative/Democratic. We then identified the changing orientations of the actors to these persuasive tensions.

Description of episodes

The Cosby Show--The Huxtable family consists of Cliff, the father, Claire, the mother and five children: Sondra, Denise, Theo, Vanessa and Rudy (approximate ages are twenty, seventeen, fifteen, thirteen, and five, respectively). Cliff is an obstetrician/gynecologist and Claire is an attorney. The Huxtables are presented as an urban, upper middle-class family.

Episode #1- Denise asks Cliff to examine one of her friends who has a medical problem. The friend does not want to discuss the problem with her parents for fear she may have to reveal that she is sexually active. The situation triggers Cliff's concern over whether or not his own children would come to him and Claire with their problems. The main action centers around a family meeting (called by Cliff) designed to promote a discussion of seeking parental help in times of trouble.

Episode #2- Rudy want to buy, Megawoman, a new fad doll. Clair and Cliff refuse to buy the doll for her. Rudy persists in expressing her desire for the doll. The action of this episode centers around negotiating ways for Rudy to earn her own money to purchase the doll.

Episode #3- Theo is concerned about a math test that he has taken in school that day. When his teacher, Mrs. Westlake, calls Cliff, he invites her and her husband to the house for dinner that evening. Theo is upset with his parents for putting him in the position of having to have dinner with Mrs. Westlake. The action in this segment centers around the dinner and the family interactions that precede and follow it.

Family Ties--Alex, Mallory, Jennifer, and baby Andrew (approximate ages are twenty, seventeen, thirteen, and six months respectively), are the children of Steven and Elyse Keaton. Steven works for a public television station and Elyse is an architect. Their views on social and political issues reflect the liberalism of the sixties while Alex espouses the business-oriented conservatism of the eighties. Like the Huxtables, the Keatons appear to be an upper middle-class urban family.

Episode #1- Mallory fears she may not graduate from high school because she is failing history. Alex and Jennifer convince her to go to her parents with her problem. A confrontation ensues, but later the family rallies around Mallory's efforts to prepare for the final exam.

Episode #2- Elyse's brother, Uncle Ned, comes for a visit. Everyone in the family is delighted to see him again, but after a few days Alex realizes that Uncle Ned has a severe drinking problem. At first, Steven and Elyse do not believe Alex, but when his problem becomes apparent by his actions, the couple confront him with it.

DATA ANALYSIS

In this section we analyze two dialectical relationships that characterize the families' interactions. The two relationships that we discuss are not the only identifiable ones, although they appeared to be the most predominant. Nor are the examples we analyze exhaustive of the data we gathered from the five episodes. We do feel, however, that the sampling is representative of the interactional patterns that emerged, and therefore provide us with a rational basis for describing interpersonal interaction from a dialectical perspective.

Autonomy/Constraint

One of the relationships that we observed in the data centered around the tensions between autonomy and constraint. We identified as "autonomy" those utterances in which an appeal was made for the importance of self-determination, free choice, and the right to define one's self. Opposing appeals for autonomy, were those for constraint. Such utterances emphasized the limits of possiblity and attempted to assert the correctness or preferability of one choice over others.

In episode two of "The Cosby Show," Claire refuses to buy Rudy an expensive new doll so Rudy negotiates with Cliff and Claire to earn the money:

Claire: No Megawoman!

Rudy: I'll pay for it.

Cliff: How? You don't have a job.

Rudy: I'll get one.

Cliff: Doing what?

Rudy: Cleaning up my room.

Cliff: You already do that for free.

Claire: Suppose Rudy does extra work around the house? We could pay her for that. You can start by helping me clean out the cupboards.

Rudy: Okay. I'll do it for nine dollars [the price of the doll]

Claire: The job pays 50¢ an hour.

In the example above, Claire's initial move is one of constraint. She places a clear limit on Rudy's possibilities; buying Megawoman is eliminated as an option. Rudy refuses to accept her mother's decision as final and asserts her autonomy by proposing to buy the doll herself. Cliff counters by indicating an additional constraint on Rudy's ability to exercise free choice ("You don't have a job."). Rudy again rejects her parents' attempt to constrain her range of choices and makes another appeal for autonomy ("I'll get one."). The next exchange between Rudy and her parents follows a similar pattern: Cliff appeals from constraint and Rudy responds with a bid for autonomy. The next move finds Claire reversing her earlier position (appealing from constraint) and making an offer grounded in notions of self-reliance (Rudy can earn her own money by helping with household chores). Interestingly, while Claire's offer seems to support Rudy's earlier bids for self-direction, she also places parameters on that self-direction. Rudy may have the doll if she agrees to Claire's proposal. In her next turn, Rudy appears to accept the conditions imposed by her mother (that she earn the money) but attempts to assert her right to impose conditions as well ("I'll do it for nine dollars."). Claire's response to the condition Rudy offers represents both sides of the autonomy/constraint dialectic. On the one hand, she refuses to accept Rudy's condition and asserts a counter-condition ("The job pays fifty cents an hour."). On the other hand, she lets her "job offer" stand, thus continuing to provide a context in which Rudy can exercise self-determination.

In this brief exchange, the oppositional tension between autonomy and constraint is explicitly illustrated. From turn to turn one polarity is articulated followed by an opposite articulation. Even when Claire modifies her earlier position and makes room for exercising some form of autonomy within a circumscribed range of options, Rudy reactivates the tension by resisting the boundaries Claire imposes and attempting to set them herself.

In addition, this excerpt demonstrates that the articulation of one polarity in a dialectical relation necessarily calls forth the opposing polarity. That is, given that elements in a dialectical relation are embedded within one another, one element cannot get produced without concommitantly producing its opposite. The continual presence of both sides of a dialectical tension provides the means through which the contradictory nature of social reality is created and sustained.

The conversation from "The Cosby Show" shows the turn-to-turn articulation of the autonomy/constraint dialectic. Although Claire's positionality shifts during the interaction, Rudy speaks the autonomy polarity consistently. In another excerpt from "The Cosby Show," (episode three) the autonomy/constraint tension reappears, but this time both polarities are spoken by a single speaker in the course of one conversational turn.

In this segment, Mrs. Westlake, Theo's math teacher, comes to the house for dinner. She talks about how she worked two jobs to put herself through school when she came to the United States:

Mrs. Westlake: Yeah, but I didn't mind the work. I was in America. I knew that if I worked hard I could be whatever I wanted. That's why I make you, Theo, work so hard. [She mentions sending Theo to the blackboard to work problems at the beginning of the term].I wanted you to know that I knew you weren't prepared. I thought it might make you study more.

Theo: It did!

Mrs. Westlake: I know. Now when you go to the blackboard you do much, much better and the class sees this and they want to do better, too.

Claire remarks that Theo is lucky to have a teacher like Mrs. Westlake, to which Mrs. Westlake replies:

Mrs. Westlake: Thank you. You know I get excited when my students do the work I know they can do. I don't like it when I see children take education for granted. That's why I'm tough on you and I'll keep being tough.

In this instance, Mrs. Westlake begins by arguing for the importance of individual initiative to achieving one's personal goals. Such an argument is grounded in notions of autonomous self-motivation ("I knew if I worked hard I could be whatever I wanted."). Following her claims based on principles of autonomy, Mrs. Westlake contradicts her previous claim by suggesting that, as Theo's teacher, she wants to constrain his options so that he will make choices similar to her own. Sending Theo to the blackboard was a behavioral manifestation of how she aspires to force him to "study more." Theo acknowledges the value of her constraining acts and Claire agrees as she remarks upon Theo's good fortune in having a teacher like Mrs. Westlake. Mrs. Westlake makes an additional constraining move when she says that she does not "like it when children take education for granted." This statement implies that a desire to lead students to value education as she does motivates her tough style in the classroom. Mrs. Westlake, then, formulates the autonomy/constraint dialectic by articulating an essential contradiction: In America making one's own choices and realizing one's personal aspirations are possible providing one follows others' prescriptions for doing so.

The example above demonstrates the dialectical tension between opposites rests in the phenomenon itself, not in the individuals. The communication manifests the contradictions within the dialectical system. In the following

"Family Ties" segment, we can get a better sense of how the speakers continually rotate their positions over a series of interactions dealing with the same problem. This extented example provides a better understanding of how these rotations may operate in longer temporal sequences.

In episode one of "Family Ties," Mallory tells her parents that she may not graduate from high school:

Steven: Why is this the first we're hearing of this [not graduating]?

Mallory: I didn't mention it before. I guess I was hoping it wouldn't come to this, that I'd get the diploma somehow.

Elyse: But how did you plan on getting this diploma, Mal? By going to the mall four nights a week, by spending all that time with Nick, by talking, on the phone all hours?

Mallory: Well, don't yell at me. I'm feeling bad enough already.

Elyse: I have to yell at you. It's the only way I get through to you these days.

Steven and Elyse (the parents) imply that Mallory has made self-directing choices concerning how she spends her time and they challenge those choices. The parents attempt to constrain her subsequent behavior by demanding that she "take things seriously" and "grow up." In other words, the parents work to place limits on what constitutes "acceptable" free choice by indicating the negative consequences of Mallory's previous selections and asserting the preferability of choosing "seriousness" instead.

Later in the same conversation, Mallory asks:

Mallory: Can't you guys talk to Mrs. Hillman for me?

Elyse: What are we going to say? That she should let you graduate even though you haven't done the work and you don't deserve it?

Steven: Look, I think your only choice now is to sit down and study as hard as you can.

Mallory: It won't help. I'm not smart.

Elyse: You're smart, Mallory. It's just that you don't apply yourself. Your teachers have always said that.

Steven: You're not giving yourself a chance. Not this time it's too important.

Mallory: I'm scared.

Elyse: You have no choice.

When Mallory asks her parents to intercede with Mrs. Hillman (her teacher) on her behalf, she appears to, at least temporarily, abdicate her perceived right to self-determination. Interestingly, when Mallory appears to relinquish some measure of her autonomy, Elyse immediately responds by insisting that Mallory's personal choices led to the current dilemma and that these choices cannot be reversed by intervention from others. Mallory created the problem and thus it must be Mallory who corrects it. After Elyse argues from autonomy, Steven counters with a constraint appeal; Mallory no longer has any choice but to "sit down and study."

Following Steven's comment, Mallory claims that she is not smart and her mother responds with an opposing claim ("You're smart, Mallory. It's just that you don't apply yourself."). In this instance, Mallory's bid for autonomy (as expressed through self-definition) is again challenged. Steven's remark concerning the importance of the situation represents a subtle attempt to again constrain Mallory's choices. Elyse's final comment ("You have no choice.") represents an unambiguous constraint move.

Permeating this conversation, then, is the continual opposition of bids for autonomy versus constraint. Intriguingly, no one character speaks one polarity of the dialectic consistently. Instead, as a character speaks a polarity, some other character counters with its opposite. Thus, this conversation is animated, not by opposing viewpoints embodied in individual

speakers, but by the tension itself as articulated by speakers locating themselves as subjects in the discourses of autonomy or constraint. The characters keep the tension alive by articulating the contradictions and, in doing so, reproduce them.

The exchanges between Mallory and her parents described above appear to end with the triumph of constraint over autonomy. The constraint/autonomy tension reappears later, however, in the same episode. Mallory passes the exam and has the following conversation with her parents at the graduation ceremony:

Elyse: Mallory, I'm so proud of you!

Mallory: Well, I made it.

Steven: You worked hard and it paid off.

Mallory: Yeah, well you forced me to work hard.

Elyse: We didn't force you, we encouraged you.

Mallory: Yeah, forcefully.

In this excerpt, the first three exchanges articulate the autonomy structure of the dialectic. Elyse's expression of pride suggests that she credits Mallory's personal efforts with producing the desired result (her graduation). Steven agrees and credits it to the fact that she worked hard. Mallory rejects the implication that her success resulted from wholly autonomous decisions, but claims that it was her parents constraint (forcing her to work hard) which led her to make the "proper" choice. Elyse makes another autonomy move by denying that Mallory was forced: "We encouraged you." Mallory replies, "Yeah, forcefully," indicating a counter move to constraint.

As Baxter (in press) notes, a dialectical transformation or "a shift in which polarity is dominant" does not signal the resolution of an oppositional tension.[30] The last conversation cited between Mallory and her parents demonstrates the enduring or repetitive nature of dialectical relationships. In addition, our analysis in the foregoing section points to an intriguing paradoxical system which operates in the Keaton family. On the one hand, the parents cultivate their daughter's development as a self-motivating adult. On the other hand, they retain substantial influencein directing her choices. The contradiction, then, is essentially this: Be self-determining in the ways we tell you to be. Neither moves toward unrestricted autonomy nor moves toward complete reliance on parental constraints pass unchallenged. Mallory and her parents vascillate continually between these contradictory positions.

Authoritative/Democratic

The second major dialectical relatonship we observed concerns authoritative versus deomocratic distributions of family power. Authoritative systems are those in which power is invested in an exercised by central authority figure(s). In democratic systems power is distributed more equally among individuals.

Numerous authors have noted the centrality of the open versus restricted disclosure issue in intimate relationships.[31] Baxter (in press), however, discusses the open versus restricted notion as a dialectical contradiction.[32] Additionally, we suggest that the open/restricted dialectic is embedded in the more overarching relationship between authoritativeness and democracy. That is, the ability to encourage open disclosures (and hence vulnerability) from others while restricting one's own reciprocal disclosure (thus limiting one's own vulnerability) constitutes a means for achieving and maintaining power. Such an operation has an

authoritarian flavor insofar as one or more parties has access to greater information than do other parties. Alternately, when individuals engage in fairly reciprocal disclosure, thus, equalizing their vulnerability to each other and the amount of information each can access, their power relationship may have more democratic characteristics. Rather than having access to information concentrated in the hands of only a few individuals, access to information is spread more evenly among individuals.

The example presented below illustrate the relationship between disclosure of information and struggles to define power relations within the families. In episode one of "The Cosby Show," Denise's girlfriend has come to Cliff for advice on a medical problem she chooses not to discuss with her parents. During the exchange with her Cliff remarks:

> Cliff: All I know is that if any of my children ever got into trouble or had a problem and felt they couldn't come to my wife or me, I'd have a fit.

Later that day, Cliff returns home and calls a family meeting. He begins by saying:

> Cliff: I want you all to know that if you ever have a problem, if you ever get into any kind of trouble, to feel free, no matter how bad you think it is to come to your mother or me and we will try to help you.

The children say, "Okay," and move to leave the meeting. Cliff stops them by saying, "I'd hope this would be the beginning of a discussion." Cliff's first two statements suggest that he wants his children to freely discuss their problems with him and Claire. He urges the children to disclose their problems, but does not propose that such disclosures should be reciprocated. Thus, his statements constitute bids for an authoritarian power structure in which the children make themselves vulnerable to him while he remains invulnerable. Moreover, Cliff solidifies his bid for authority by claiming that if his children concealed their problems, he'd "have a fit."

By stating that he wants the meeting to be a "discussion," Cliff's third statement appears to be a bid for a more democratic structure. A discussion implies a participatory event in which everyone is free to contribute comments and suggestions. This seemingly democratic move, however, is undercut by the fact that he made the statement to keep the children from leaving the "meeting," thus reinforcing his authority position. His remark, therefore, comprises both polarities of the authoritative/democratic tension.

The children question whether or not they really could come to their parents with their problems and decide to test Cliff's claim with some hypothetical examples:

Sandra: If you promise you won't get mad maybe we should give you some examples. Say Vanessa was secretly seeing a seventeen year old.

Cliff: First of all, I would not get angry because she came to us.

Claire: No, we wouldn't get angry, but we would get serious. And we'd sit Miss Vanessa down and have a long talk.

Theo: Say, I took the keys to your car and drove downtown to get some burgers and when I brought your car back, it had a ding in it.

Cliff: I would feel very, very comfortable with my son...

(children laugh)

Cliff: I would work it out with him to get the car fixed.

(children laugh)

Denise: Remember when I spent the night at Valerie's. Well, I really spent the night with Tommy. We didn't do anything. Are you angry?

Cliff: Ask your mother (Cliff is becoming more visibly angry).

Claire: No, I'm not angry, I'm mad!

Denise: I was just kidding!

Claire: Denise, I'm going to talk to you!

By claiming he would not get angry about Sondra's example concerning Vanessa, Cliff reinforces the importance of openness by indicating that the children can make themselves vulnerable without fear of reprisal. Claire's next speech, however, contradicts Cliff's previous statement concerning how the parents deal with their children's disclosures. Her statement exposes a risk the children must take in allowing themselves to be vulnerable. They must risk possible reprimand or punishment. Perhaps, then, the environment is not as "safe" for disclosing as Cliff's earlier comment implies. Claire's statement reinforces the notion that having access to another's vulnerabilities puts one in the position of being able to censure that person; a form of power. As in the case of the Huxtable family, when such censuring opportunities are not shared by all parties, more potential power is invested in those with censuring privileges. Restricting disclosure, then, (when no reciprocal disclosures are offered) is a form of resistance to centralized authority structures.

The Huxtable children find themselves in a system in which openness is both encouraged and punished. Further, the children have no access to the kind of intimate information about their parents that the parents expect the children to reveal about themselves. Thus, choosing to resist openness by restricting their disclosures functions to subvert the existing power structure. By resisting bids from their parents for an authoritarian relationship, the children present an opposing structure (increased democracy).

The remainder of the conversation follows a similar pattern. When Theo offers another example, Cliff again makes claims that such disclosures would not be punished. The children begin to laugh. Their laughter suggests that not only are they rejecting Cliff's claims, but are positioning themselves in stronger opposition to the authoritarian structure. In their opposition, the

Huxtable children move toward strengthening the dominance of the democratic structure, one which is based on a more equal distribution of power.

The opposition between openness and restrictiveness and its relationship to the general tension between authoritativeness and democracy also appears in episode three of "Family Ties." Elyse's brother, Ned, is visiting the family and Alex becomes aware of the fact that Ned has a drinking problem:

Alex: Listen, Mom, we have a real problem here.

Elyse: Yeah, what's that?

Alex: Yeah, well, it's Uncle Ned. He's been drinking a lot, Mom.

Elyse: This is a very difficult time for him, Alex. Just because he's drinking a little more than usual doesn't mean he's a drunk.

Alex: No, you gotta listen to me. If you had seen him last night.

Elyse: Ned seems fine to me.

Alex: Trust me, Mom. Uncle Ned has a drinking problem and you've got to do something about it.

In his initial statements, Alex tells his Mother that Ned is drinking heavily and identifies the behavior as a "real problem." His claim constitutes a bid for open disclosure. The bid is countered by Elyse's rejection of Alex's interpretation, a move toward restricting disclosure. This pattern continues throughout the conversation. Each move toward an increased disclosure is met with a countermove toward restricting disclosure.

Unlike "The Cosby Show" episode wherein the parents encourage the children to disclose information about their problems, Elyse discourages Alex from discussing a potentially serious problem; the location of the problems differ, but the approaches taken by all of the adults represent bids for centralized power even though they do so by articulating opposite poles of the open/restricted dialectic. We argued previously that restricting one's

disclosure may serve as a form of resistance to an authoritarian structure in which openness is encouraged, as was the case in the Huxtable family. However, centralized power may also be maintained through attempts to restrict discussion of certain topics, as Elyse does with Alex. In systems characterized by the use of information restriction as the primary means for maintaining power relations, openness (or attempts to discuss taboo subjects) constitute forms of opposition. Moreover, those individuals who hold dominate power positions may speak either or both polarities of the open/restricted dialectic when necessary to protect their interests. Of course, subordinated persons change articulations as well in order to sustain their opposition. Insofar as Cliff and Claire Huxtable and Elyse Keaton are the spokespersons for the voice of formal authority, they have a vested interest in protecting their place in the discourse of authority and thus vascillate in their articulations of the open/restricted dialectic when faced with challenges.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this descriptive study was to explore the usefulness of a dialectical analysis in interpreting family interactional processes. As noted earlier, the conversations we analyzed are examplars of the dialectical relationships we discovered in the five episodes, which constitute a relatively small sampling. As such, we do not claim that the data collected are representative of all of "The Cosby Show" and "Family Ties" programs. Nor do we suggest that these two television shows necessarily typify "ideal" television viewing for audiences. As mentioned earlier, in both cases the adults are all professionals, which limits the perspective to some extent. We

do feel, however, that these television families are reflections of social reality for some segments of society. Our sampling, then, was purposeful, and used as a strategy to provide some insights about a dialectical approach to examining interpersonal discourse.[33] Given the exploratory nature of this study, then, the conclusions we draw will be tentative ones.

Our analysis suggests that by assuming a dialectical perspective on the study of family interaction we were able to address elements of family activity which we feel are inaccessible when applying spatio-structural models. Three elements can be identified as being most relevant. First, a dialectical approach directs attention to concrete behavioral practices themselves, rather than to supposed outcomes of such practices. By assuming a dialectical approach, we were able to provide turn-by-turn analyses of family conversation, thereby revealing micro-practices which create, sustain and transform family life. Since family life is constituted by constellations of micro-practices, such detailed analyses provide a richer understanding of what it means to be a "family." Further, given the evidence presented earlier (which claims that viewers may use television material to construct their social realities) it is important to understand the specific nature of the communication material viewers consume. Our analysis contributes to that kind of understanding.

Secondly, the temporal aspect of family interaction, which receives short shrift in other traditional models, is emphasized in dialectical thought. One of the things that our analysis revealed was the movements over time in the articulation of contradictory tensions, and speakers' changing positionalities vis-a-vis these contractions. Attention to movement and time allows for greater sensitivity in the observation of subtle changes in families' discursive practices than does analysis grounded in spatial biases. A

dialectical analysis also provides a basis from which to launch arguments against the assumption that interpersonal systems function as homeostatically driven, cybernetic entities. Dialectical reasoning underscores the possibility of change at any given point in a temporal sequence.

Finally, the primacy of contradictions in a dialectical scheme challenges the notion, as Kantor and Lehr suggest, that families cohere around unified goals and constitutes what we feel to be a more provocative explanation of family cohesiveness. Positing unitary notions (such as goals) as explanations for the cohesion in any type of social collective, serves to condense differences among practices,[34] to blunt the impact of the conflicts among differing interests represented in social bodies and to provide higher-order constructs through which social tension is supposedly mediated and the dialectical contradictions are normalized. On the other hand, dialectical analysis highlights contradictions embedded in social practice, thus sharpening the enduring conflicts which serve as a basis for connection among members of cultural systems and give such systems their vitality and resilience.

The three elements which are inherent in dialectics--process in behavioral practices, the temporality of such practices and the inescapability of contradiction, oppose the asssumptions that systems are stable, that individuals give into systemic constraint, and that conflict resolution always occurs. In sum, dialectical theory makes problematic a number of assumptions associated with family systems and processes and opens up possibilities for new areas of inquiry in family studies.

In addition to revealing the issues discussed above, we feel that our analysis suggests several possibilities for future research foci in the area of family dialectics:

(1) Replications of this type of study need to be done using larger samples of television data.

(2) Studies which apply dialectical analysis to "naturally-occurring" family discourse might be considered.

(3) Studies which may provide a link between the dialectics of "naturally occurring" and television family discourse could be undertaken.

(4) Studies attempting to describe more complete matrices of dialectical relations might shed some light on the nature of the larger oppositional system in which families are embedded.

The suggestions for future research mentioned above are four in a field of numerous other possibilities for extending the analytic foci addressed in this essay. The issue of dialectical relationships calls for more studies. At this stage, we believe that dialectical theory, as a potentially viable and dynamic approach to examining family interaction, deserves and needs moreresearch endeavors from communication scholars. As Baxter notes:

> Although threads of dialectical thinking have emerged among several theorists and researchers . . . a whole theoretical cloth has yet to be constructed which advances a dialectical theory of relationships.[35]

We consider this study a step, albeit a small one, in contributing to the growing body of research in the dialectics of face-to-face and mediated communication.

NOTES

[1]Insofar as the use of quantitative methodologies necessitates radically reducing conversational data and substituting statistical results (abstractions) for the data themselves, such methodologies are inconsistent with the non-reductionistic, materially-focused assumptions of dialectical logic.

[2]In order to assure the representativeness of our sample, we recorded six sequential episodes of each program and retained every other episode for final analysis. One episode of "Family Ties," however, was eliminated from the analysis because the plot centered primarily on characters other than the family members. Given the episodic nature of situation comedies and the lack of sequentiality from one program to the next, our sampling procedure does not interrupt any temporal evolution in plot development.

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